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ABSTRACT

A study used the frameworks of Rogers (1977) and Giddens (1977, 1979, 1995) to study the experiences of 10 adult distance learners enrolled in one or both of two online undergraduate business management courses. Rogers proposed that, when viewed through perspectives on power relationships, freedom and choice suggest that power is not just a matter of obtaining control over others but also sharing or surrendering power. Giddens described a relational sense of power that can include both domination and agency simultaneously and suggested that people seek routines in their lives as a way to maintain control. Participant interviews were taped and transcribed; separate thematic analyses using both transcripts and tapes were performed by all three team members and compared. Findings supported Giddens' assumption that people seek out routines that are influenced by power structures involving resources such as time, proximity, authority, and material or economic resources. The structure, not just the flexibility, of the courses helped learners manage daily routines that were described in part as a system of relational power that involved their instructors, employers, families, and, to a lesser extent, fellow learners. (15 references) (YLB)

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Power Relationships In Two Web-Based Courses

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Abstract: This study examined the experiences of ten adult distance learners enrolled in on-line undergraduate business management courses. The frameworks of Rogers and Giddens have relevance for these distance learners who displayed strategies for exerting agency over time, proximity, and authority in order to maintain, obtain, surrender, or share control.

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Introduction

Web-based learning is often professed to empower learners with new choices, but examinations of how distance learners possess power and negotiate their own interests in these choices are uncommon. While embedded in discussions of self-direction and autonomy in learning (Eastmond, 1995; Kasworm & Bing, 1992), choice is more likely to be represented as differing degrees of instructor control or learner independence (Anderson & Garrison, 1998) within the confines of the instructor-learner relationship. On the other hand, described as separate issues, distance education is said to provide learners flexibility and choice in when and where they choose to participate in formal education during their daily lives. Gibson (1998) describes the local world in which the distance learner makes these decisions about time and place as intimately connected to the educational experiences provided by institutions of higher education. Distance learning environments extend beyond these instructor-learner relationships and are, for the learner who no longer physically leaves her own community, still local. Local relationships represent interests in the learner's daily life and, therefore, involve power and negotiations that can affect learning.

Freedom and choice, when viewed through perspectives on power relationships, suggest that power is not just a matter of obtaining control over others but also sharing or surrendering power (Rogers, 1977). In examining helping relationships, Rogers, describes the sharing of power as the ideal for the client or, as in educational interventions, the learner. When power is shared in the classroom, learners may have the opportunity to influence the teaching-learning relationship and make the outcomes more relevant to their lives. While current literature in distance education promotes a facilitative approach to learning where power is shared (Pallof & Pratt, 1999), the reality can be that distance learning designs do not support the sharing of power but rather must be viewed as obtaining, surrendering, or even maintaining power. Because of multiple responsibilities in life, adult learner participation in an educational experience extends beyond the classroom. Therefore, power relationships with instructors interact with other relationships and can be described in any combination of sharing, obtaining, or surrendering power. Each relationship exerts some control over the learner, and, therefore, can affect how or where learning occurs and other relationships in the learner's life. This view is similar to Giddens' (1977) description of a relational sense of power that can include both domination and agency simultaneously. Giddens' work has particular relevance for distance education since both time and proximity represent elements of how power structures maintain control and how individuals exert agency in effecting change in those structures. Giddens suggests that people seek routines in their lives as a way to maintain control. Flexibility in access and course design,

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both being structures, are typically seen as assets of distance learning when they support the development or maintenance of routines.

In Giddens' framework power is negotiated through the structuring of time, proximity, and authority; all of which have relevance for distance learning. For Giddens, time is specific time, including amount of time, and use of time. Individuals adopt routines according to how much power they or others have over these structures. Employers, other community members, instructors, and families exercise varying amounts of control over the learner's time. Place in Giddens' framework, another distance learning element, is the structuring of power by control over proximity. When routines enabling people to maintain control over their lives require them to be in the proximity of a certain location such as an office or classroom, these represent power structures in individuals' lives. Distance education is promoted as giving up these proximity structures of the classroom and, ideally, the surrounding campus, but other structures such as the location of needed technologies can be created in their place.

Authoritative structures, such as policies, also affect distance learning situations. For Giddens, authoritative structures are the most powerful as they can influence time and proximity. In his social critique employers exert power by requiring workers to be at places of employment (proximity) at certain hours. Distance education has been promoted as recognizing this power and allowing learners flexibility in time and place. On the other hand, formal education courses have syllabi and institutional policies that, in Giddens framework, extend control across wider space. A structured syllabus and other standards (Tait & Mills, 1999) are often seen as needed by distance learners to give the learner flexibility but also raise the question of how much power the instructor is unnecessarily retaining in some environments described as self-directed learning.

Gidden's (1995) concept of agency also has relevance for distance learning. Agency is the individual's ability to take action, that is, to act autonomously. People are able to use their knowledge to take action and affect their environment. Agency in part can be the personal power that individuals have to effect change in these power structures. Adult distance learners have been described as having this ability to be autonomous (Eastmond, 1995). Gidden's framework would suggest that a source of this autonomy or agency may be past experience in prior educational environments. The amount of agency learners may feel in a face-to-face educational environment may depend on the structure of the course and the relationship with or climate promoted by the instructor (Tisdell, 1993; Nesbit, 1998). Adult distance learners in this study described situations where they used their cultural skills as learners to influence and create balance among these sometimes competing systems of education, work, family, and community.

Methods

The frameworks of Rogers (1977) and Giddens (1977, 1979, 1995) were used to examine the experiences of ten adult distance learners enrolled in one or both of two on-line undergraduate business management courses. Respondents were self-selected based on their availability and willingness to participate. Ages ranged from the early twenties to late fifties. Two were African American and eight were white. Eight were married and five, including one single mother, had children with ages ranging from one to 27 years. Seven of the learners were employed full-time, two worked part-time, and one was not currently employed outside the home. One to one and a half hour interviews were conducted, audio-taped, and transcribed by one research team member. Separate thematic analyses using both transcripts and tapes were performed by all three team members and compared. While not presented here, this analysis revealed that these learners valued relevancy from their course content to their lives and work,

but valued obtaining the degree even more. They were willing to give away power over the lesser to obtain the more needed reward. The learners were seen as developing different types of relationships and using different strategies for negotiating with instructors to make sure that they acquired whatever was necessary to pass the course while still seeking relevancy to their lives wherever they could. The learners appeared to be negotiating interests, and further analysis of the data was conducted by the author using assumptions suggested by the Rogers' and Giddens' frameworks. The analysis explored how these learners described sources of power and how they obtain, possess, share, or surrender power in relation to their distance learning experiences.

Findings

The findings for these ten learners support Giddens' (1977) assumption that people seek out routines that are influenced by power structures involving resources such as time, proximity, authority, and material or economic. The structure, not just the flexibility, of these courses did help learners to manage daily routines. These routines was described in part as a system of relational power that involved their instructors, employers, families, and, to a lesser extent, fellow learners. Some power structures were accepted without question, or at least without overt questioning, and were related to earning payment for work and earning grades for acquired knowledge or credentialing. Both stabilization and change (including negotiations and compromise) in the structure of these systems (employment, educational, and familial) occur with actions taken over time. Autonomy of choice in routines and in learning, or valued knowledge, were still limited by these power structures, but learners also attempted to use different strategies for negotiating power with their instructors and their families.

The resources negotiated in these adult learners' distance education involvement were their paychecks, grades, and academic degree. While beyond the findings of this study, the assumption that their identity and security as professionals and family members is also at stake in negotiating interests helps to interpret their stories. Just as Giddens describes the use of authoritative structures, time, and proximity as the primary forces at work in the exchange of economic, material, and other resources, these learners' descriptions of their distance learning experiences were about time, place, and course structures in relation to those resources.

The term distance education suggests that surrendering place has been a means for giving flexibility to learners, and proximity is, of course, the most obvious element or resource being negotiated in these learners' experiences. Except for proctored exams, the instructors gave up power over proximity, and some learners attempted to gain power over testing locations, as well. Employers did not appear to give up power over proximity. The gain learners made in terms of power over proximity came as increased proximity to home and family. As one learner commented, "I just go upstairs in my pajamas...It's like tele-commuters in the workplace... I can multi-task very effectively and systematically. "Distance" in distance education is more an element of 'time saved' for many learners, and time and place have a similar relationship in Giddens' theories. Shifts or lack of shift in power structures related to proximity were further explained by these learners' negotiations of time.

Time existed in three dimensions related to routines; specific times of day, amount of time, and use of time. Instructor surrendered most, but not all, specific times for the course but retained power over amount of study time required. Choice of part-time work was the only compromise among some learners' relationships with employers. For example, one middled-aged sales representative's employer allowed him time flexibility as long as he produced sales. The lack of shifts in some aspects of these relational power structures restricted any gains by the

learners in negotiating interests within their family structures. While both amount of time and specific time available for being in the proximity of family increased, flexibility in the use of that time was not as great a gain since these adults "multi-tasked" by combining responsibilities and time at home was not necessarily considered "quality" time with family.

> "The decision to take this course resulted in a reduction of time I spent with my family (when at home). As well, our family had to make a significant investment in a computer that was Internet friendly. In addition, due to my involvement in this course I've monopolized the computer at home. My sons don't have as much time as they would like to use it."

However, use of time for some also meant being able to do course work during lunch breaks, on business trips, and in doctor's waiting rooms.

In these distance education courses, control was extended across space by use of the syllabi. For some learners, clarity of policies did stabilize the "routine." For others, when the instructor relinquished the power of proximity (classroom) and retained the power of written policy (syllabi), this created an urgency to re-establish past routines in order to have more familiar means of negotiating with instructors. Concerns over content irrelevancy were sometimes contradictory in description, since the authoritative resources related to grade and career advancement could be in conflict temporarily but stabilized in the long run in order to obtain a degree valued by the employer. In deciding whether to contact the instructor, one learner stated:

> If the question pertains to the subject matter, sure I'd have to get the answer. If it was a curious question such as why is that relevant or how does that work or how is that going to deal into other things - you just don't ask the question.

These distance learners could only be described as empowered by their ability to have more control over time and place for learning. In order to obtain their degree, most still found it necessary to surrender power to instructors over tests and grades, the amount of time a course takes, and the willingness of the instructor to communicate and give feedback (though some attempted to negotiate this). To their employers they surrendered specific times to be at work, expectations for skills and credentials, and their present financial security. Strategies that involve sharing power between the learner and the instructor included non-specific time involvement, self-directed learning approaches, subject matter relevance, mutual respect and understanding of each other, and providing or using alternative ways of interacting with each other. Comments about sharing usually referred to the instructors willingness to understand and adapt, such as:

> ...there were a few kinks the professor had to work out with us...what we had time for, ...access to... when we could go on campus.

The only strategies for sharing power with employers described were the ability to schedule work through part-time or a production-based sales position and convincing an employer to value a new set of skills demonstrated by the employee/learner. The learners did not describe surrendering of power to their families other than the implied value of the relationship, but rather made statements that indicated possessing or a sharing of power. As one spouse described, "We balance our schedule to include it all. On weekends we have family time. We cooperate with study time."

While the learners obtained some degree of power with their employers when they obtained credentials or their skills gained them influence on the job, the strategies having the most direct implications for distance education were those used, adapted, or created by learners to gain control over their instructors at a distance. The learners described the need for relationships with instructors regardless of online or classroom environments but often used different strategies or communications channels for each. Learners developed relationships with instructors for the

primary purpose of obtaining the grade, but also for obtaining respect. If content clarity was needed for passing the test, asking questions in class was substituted with the use of email in most cases. If the issue was relevance to the work, mutual respect, or the need for a more personal relationship with instructors, learners sometimes sought more traditional, personal contact such as face-to-face interaction. Audio and video of the instructor substituted for part of the face-to-face contact in class in providing opportunity to listen for examples, emphasis, and observe personality in some cases. One person comparing the two online courses said:

> Actually, online courses can be good if the professor takes the time to really make it where you hear it from him not just the book. ... When you hear what comes out of his mouth, nine times out of ten its going to be on the test.

If needed, learners used email to seek out contact with other learners in order to validate understanding of both content and the instructor's personality. For some it took a little while to learn how to substitute this electronic interaction for the face-to-face that occurs in traditional settings, and, while varying in need, none of the ten learners developed the kinds of personal relationships with co-learners that might occur in face-to-face environments.

Implications

For these learners, Giddens' (1977) framework represents how they out routines. The structure desired from the course helped them manage other routines. They are willing to place themselves within a system of relational power that involves the players identified. Proximity of place allowed more control over how people used their personal time, and increased with the power that these systems have over the resources of money and grades. However, the instructor has given up control over the theoretical 'punch clock" while the employer has not. Because of the combined influences of material (financial) and authoritative (employment requirements) structures on the learner, employers' sphere of influence, or "territorial space," may include the educational provider. But the educational provider's territorial space does not always include the employer. However, to some extent the educational provider's territorial space does include the employee only to the extent that she is a student.

Implications for research and practice are suggested by Gibson's (1998) viewpoint that interventions implemented in both remote and local systems can affect the development of the learner. Since the adult learner's community life is filled with interactions where interests are constantly negotiated, research and program planning for learning interventions within these local systems can be enhanced by giving attention to these negotiations. Taking a systems approach that analyzes power and influence in how distance learners engage in their educational experiences is necessary to understanding their experiences and for making decisions about course design. Without examination of power, studies of distance learning that conclude giving up control over time and space automatically frees up time and creates space for control and self-directed learning, might miss the influence of other power relationships in the learner's world. This limited view of 'self-direction' can result in limited typologies of distance learning that extend the power of traditional educational structures inappropriately beyond the campus boundaries.

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